

## Dangerous conversations in *The Duchess of Malfi*

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### Abstract

The proposition of this essay is that conversation exists as a theme in its own right in *The Duchess of Malfi*. It is clear that Webster borrowed from *The Civil Conversation* (1586), as Steffano Guazzo's book was known in English translation. Less clear is what Webster makes of conversation. As in Guazzo, honesty of conversation is a civil rather than courtly construct, and as such tracks with the theme of merit as against degree. But Webster entangles the conversation of meritorious characters with that of vicious characters in ways that Guazzo would not have countenanced. The result is a moral ambiguity which is difficult to read in terms of virtue ethics, and which calls for a reading in terms of the totalitarian contexts of the revenge play and the Tacitean history play. Such difficulties are most evident in the entangled and climatic conversations between Bosola and the Duchess.

### Indexable words:-

conversation, civil, emblems, holy, Tacitus, history, revenge, play, misogyny, sin

### Bio

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One of the stronger arguments to my mind, for unity of design in *The Duchess of Malfi* is the systematic elaboration of the opposition between merit and degree advanced by John L. Selzer. Selzer downplays the *hubris* of the Duchess's defiance of degree and stresses instead the consistency of her stand for merit, a stand he takes to be in harmony with Webster's own as revealed at two quasi-diegetic moments. The first is his dedication of the play to Baron Berkeley, in which Webster cheekily claims: "I do not altogether look up at your title, the ancientest nobility being but a relic of time past and the truest honour indeed being for a man to confer honour upon himself"(p.121). The second is Antonio's opening speech in praise of the French court for having suddenly displaced sycophancy with an honest council allowed full freedom of critique. Leah S. Marcus informs us that this speech (1.1.6-22) had not been part of the original text, and was added for a revival in 1617 when the historical occurrence to which it alludes took place (pp.94-95).

My aim in this paper is to explore an aspect of the merit theme yet to be given its due -- namely its linkage with a theme of "civil conversation". *Civile Conversation* is the title of a highly influential book by Stefano Guazzo, written in 1574 and Englished in 1581. That Webster borrows heavily from Guazzo -- both in this play and in *The White Devil* -- was exhaustively demonstrated by Marcia Lee Anderson in 1939. It is the ramifications of Guazzo's theme within the play that interest me. The turn-taking (*verso, versare*), the implied reciprocity, of conversation is innately opposed to the one-way street of degree, particularly at the levels of elaboration to which it is carried by Guazzo. My claim is that conversation is not only allied with merit in *The Duchess of Malfi* but that it is in its own right a theme pregnant with ethical and political meanings that in some points overlap with merit but in others do not. The conversation theme is displayed variously in the speech of all the major characters, normally in terms of oppositions (as when the gracefully inclusive speech of the Duchess is contrasted with the dangerous equivocations of her brothers) but it can also work in terms of deeper entanglements between these apparently opposed modes

of speaking. For the most part these vocal attributes are fixed. For the most part too, opposing speakers speak at, or past, or poisonously, or unavailingly to each-other. In two of the most strongly opposed characters however – Bosola and the Duchess – communication (in the sense of mutual “conversion”, a word that Webster would have understood to be etymologically related to “conversation”) is achieved in spite of the by-then thorough entanglement of conversational modes.

Before proceeding to the play, it may be helpful to say a few words about Guazzo and early modern conversation more broadly. *Civile Conversation* distinguishes itself from the courtly mode of Castiglione in various ways. From personal experience, Guazzo detested the role of courtier; its exposure to princely whim, its necessary servility and proneness to sycophancy. In a passage echoed by Webster in *The White Devil*, Guazzo ruefully notes the impossibility of speaking truth to princes and thus the near certainty of flattery. Here Guazzo comes close to Etienne La Boétie’s insistence that princes are actually incapable of conversation because this must by definition be with their inferiors whereas conversation requires freedom, reciprocity and substantive equality. The implication is that the very existence of degree is inimical to conversation because one of the parties will overbear the other and disable their ability to converse freely, whereby, as Guazzo puts it: “to reprehend princes it is dangerous, and to commend them, plaine lying”(p.199). Above all, Guazzo values the crucial role that a healthy conversational culture plays in the mental health of the individual. Human beings are naturally given to conversation to the extent that psychological damage must result if it is disabled or frustrated or perverted:

Man, being a compagnable creature, loveth naturally the conversation of other men, and doing the contrarie, he doth offend nature her self: for which fault many have done penance. For som by remaining inclosed in these voluntarie prisons become ill favoured, leane, forlorne, and filled full of putrified blood...and stand in feare of their owne shadowes. (p.20)

Both Aragonese brothers are psychologically damaged by the isolation to which their unhealthy conversation exposes them. In his “inward character”, the Cardinal is “a melancholy churchman” (1.2.74-75). Ferdinand seems schizophrenic. Anderson suggests that this very passage from Guazzo is echoed in the passage (5.2.30-36) in

which Ferdinand tries to throttle his own shadow (197-98). Though Webster's debt to Guazzo is considerable, he does not stop at borrowing. In certain crucial ways he accentuates Guazzo's "civil" tendency by explicitly allying conversation with merit and against degree. This might be thought of as the positive aspect of conversation in Guazzo.

In the negative, Guazzo is worried especially by the innate uncontrollability of conversation, its porous and viral quality. In civil conversation one inevitably finds oneself conversing with the worst kinds of people (blasphemers, hypocrites, sycophants, deceivers) and is thus in danger of being infected by the conversational vices that they carry. Civil conversation is innately democratic rather than hierarchical. It is shared (turn-taking) rather than singular and moreover unbound by the office or competence of either speaker. Short of a surveillance apparatus, it is disconcertingly free and open-ended. Guazzo's anxieties about conversation are caught more broadly in early modern culture by two emblems which find a resonance within *The Duchess of Malfi*. One is a winged tongue, signifying ungoverned speech. The accompanying verses in Wither's version of this emblem warn that it leads to heresies, cursing, blasphemy, slander, as well as "uproares, Murthers and Debates" (Wither, 1:42). In a version among the Hawstead Panels held at Ipswich Museum, we find the motto *Quo Tendis* (Where are you leading?) [Plate X?].<sup>1</sup> We shall come to the instance of this in *The Duchess* shortly. The second emblem consists of an earthly globe supported by a crab (Wither, 3:51). A version of the this emblem is also among the Hawstead Panels, and bears the motto, *Sic Orbis Iter*, or "such is the way of the world" (Plate XX). Ferdinand alludes directly to this latter emblem when warning his sister about clandestine marriage:

Think't the best voyage  
That e'er you made, like the irregular crab,  
Which, though't goes backward, thinks that it goes right  
Because it goes its own way. (1.2.234-37)

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<sup>1</sup> The Hawstead panels comprise some 40 emblems and other illustrations lining a small closet (7 feet square) for the use of Donne's patron, Lady Anne Bacon Drury, at

The irregularity of the crab is caught by a latin motto surrounding the emblem in Wither: *Orbis Hodie Sic Vertitur*. Wither's translation is: "The motion of the world this day is mov'd the quite contrarie way". *Vertitur*, the present passive (is turned) comes of *verto-ere* (to turn), which is itself closely related to the etymology of "conversation" (*verso, versare*) which Lewis and Short gloss as, "to turn, wind, twist (often or violently). Wither's gloss suggests the violence and irregularity of such turnings (conversions) to sectarianism or idolatry (as in the wandering jew). The resulting social chaos suggests a homology with the flying tongue emblem. *The Duchess of Malfi* registers both the positive and negative aspects of conversation as seen in Guazzo and these emblems alike. Conversation is dangerous in *The Duchess of Malfi* in the sense of its tendency towards ungoverned and vertiginous turnings, as also for its jerkily tangential or crab-like quality, its tendency to lose itself in mazes of its own making. Yet in this very feature, I shall argue, it also offers opportunities for salvation.

The positive side of Guazzo's idea of conversation is registered in a long passage that Webster takes from Guazzo to describe the conversation of the Duchess herself.<sup>2</sup> Here is the passage from Guazzo:

I say then that this Lady in conversation is singular, and mervellous: for of all the noble partes in her, you shall see her make a most delightfull harmony. For first, to the graveness of her words, agreeth the sweetnesse of her voice, and the honestie of her meaning: so that the minds of the hearers intangled in those three nets, feelee themselves at one instant to bee both moved with her amiablenesse, and bridled by her honesty. Next, her talke and discourses are so delightfull, that you wyll only then beginne to bee sory, when shee endeth to speake: and wishe that shee woulde bee no more weary to speake, then you are to heare. Yea, shee frameth her jestures so discretely, that in speaking, shee seemeth to holde her peace, and in holding her peace, to speake. Moreover, when see knoweth a matter perfectly, and discourseth of it discretely, to the great commendation of her witte, yet she wyll seeme to speake of it verie doubtfully, to shewe her great modestie. She wyll also in talke cast oft times

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<sup>2</sup> The borrowing was first noticed by Anderson, "Webster's Debt to Guazzo", 193-94.

upon a man such a sweet smyle, that it were enough to bring him into a fooles paradise, but that her very countenance containeth such continencie in it, as is sufficient to cut of all fond hope. And yet shee is so farre from solemne looks, and distributeth the treasure of her graces, so discretely and so indifferently, that no man departeth from her discontented. Yet for all that, you must not thinke that shee is over prodigall of her curtesie. For I can assure you this, she winneth moe heartes even with very slender rewardes, then other women doe with the greatest favours they can possibly shewe...I cannot sufficientlye set foorth unto you the graces and perfections of this most perfect peece, but for conclusion I will say, that shee may well bee set for an example, whereto other women ought to conforme them selves, to bee acceptable and well thoughte of in the companie they shall come in. (pp.241-42)

Webster's version of this encomium in respect of the Duchess is as follows:

For her discourse is so full of rapture,  
 You will only begin to be sorry  
 When she doth end her speech, and wish in wonder  
 She held it less vainglory to talk much  
 Than your penance to hear her. Whilst she speaks  
 She throws upon a man so sweet a look....  
 ...But in that look  
 There speaketh so divine a continence  
 As cuts off all lascivious and vain hope.  
 Her days are practiced in such noble virtue  
 That, sure, her nights – nay more, her very sleeps –  
 Are more in heaven than other ladies' shrifts. (1.2.105-21)

While Guazzo's encomium is secular, Webster's is raised to the level of what the puritans understood as "holy conversation" (Gillies, paragraphs 13-18). Thus where the discourse of Guazzo's lady is "so delightful", that of the Duchess "is so full of rapture"; where Guazzo's lady is praised for her "continencie", that of the Duchess is, "so divine"; where Guazzo's lady is discretely graceful, the Duchess spends her days in the practice of "noble virtue" and her nights, "more in heaven than other ladies'

shifts". A measure of exaggeration might be expected from a devotee, but this is just the point: merely listening to the Duchess is equivalent to a conversion experience for Antonio. The hint of divinity tallies well with the "precise" or puritanical quality of Antonio, whose own discourse is later characterised by Bosola (however disingenuously) as, "rather delighted to judge itself / Than show itself" (3.2.256-60). Here Webster plucked from his commonplace book a passage from Sidney's *Arcadia* rather than Guazzo, but the suggestion is that his conversation is as virtuously disciplined as that of the Duchess.<sup>3</sup>

These passages from Guazzo and Webster are each remarkable for rejecting what might almost call the default misogyny of the period. Guazzo's passage is the culmination of a strenuous defence of women's contribution to civil conversation: a conversation with women can be animated, graceful, enjoyable while yet being honest. Guazzo insists that women are fully the equal of men in conversation. Webster's passage opposes itself to a powerfully misogynistic trope of Jacobean tragedy; namely, the idea that conversation must corrupt a woman's honesty in direct proportion to her beauty. The genre is beholding for this to *Hamlet*.<sup>4</sup>

*Hamlet* : Ha, ha! are you honest?

*Ophelia*: My lord?

*Hamlet* : Are you fair?

*Ophelia*: What means your lordship?

*Hamlet* : That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.

*Ophelia*: Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?

*Hamlet* : Ay, truly; for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his

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<sup>3</sup> Sidney's Parthenia is described as, "a fair ambassador of a most fair mind; full of wit, and a wit which delighted more to judge itself than to shew itself" (p.88).

<sup>4</sup> The thought is not exclusive to Hamlet. Anderson points to a passage from Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*: "It is almost impossible that any woman should be excellently wittie, and not make the vtmost pennie of her beautie" (193).

likeness: this was sometime a paradox, but now the  
time gives it proof... (3.1.103-119)

The thought is morbidly reformed in its fixation on original sin (the Lutheran *fomes* or glowing embers of sin will burst into flame at the least inducement). The focus on “discourse” and “commerce” is clearly conversational, as is the negative conversion whereby honesty “translates” itself into its opposite. A squalidly untheological version of the same trope is found in Ferdinand’s sneer that, “women like that part that like the lamprey. / Hath ne’er a bone in it...I mean the tongue” (1.2.251-53), a personal variation on the winged tongue emblem perhaps. In this play misogyny is the villain’s part rather than the hero’s. However, in light of the strongly reformed character of the misogyny trope in *Hamlet*, it is remarkable that Webster should not only reject misogyny by praising the blend of delight with virtue in the Duchess’s conversation, but that he should echo Guazzo’s secular language in a reformed key.

The sanctity of the Duchess’s conversation suggests however that we should take a serious rather than a relaxed view of the conversational vices to which she resorts in the wooing of Antonio. The entrapment of Antonio by misprision of the Duchess’s ring is something which she herself acknowledges as equivalent to leaving “the path of simple virtue” (1.2.356-57) and equivocating “fearfully” like “a tyrant” (1.2.353). What the Duchess is guilty of in other words is not just violating degree by marrying in secret and well beneath herself, but deceiving her partner; trapping him in a conversational snare that he would never have entered of his own volition.<sup>5</sup> In this connection it is worth pointing out that in Webster’s principal source (Painter), the Duchess does not equivocate with “Anthonio”, she merely declares herself to him (Marcus, Appendix 1, 357-58).

What are we to make of this? Has Webster’s Duchess conformed to misogynistic stereotype after all? The effect is yet more troubling for paralleling the misprision by which Ferdinand secures the service of Bosola: handing him money for an unspecified service and then refusing to take it back when Bosola recoils at the realization that, “these cursed gifts would make / You a corrupter, me an impudent

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<sup>5</sup> In this connection, it is significant that Webster should have accentuated the difference in rank between the Duchess and her steward. In the source, Antonio....



traitor” (1.2.180-84).). It is more troubling still for falling into exactly the conversational vices with which Antonio had taxed her brothers: those of soliciting “information” – hearing “with others’ ears”, 1.2.92; (Antonio is overheard by a concealed witness) – and entrapment through equivocation.

Before attempting an answer, it is important to realize that the wickedness of the brothers is not peculiar to them alone but representative of the corruption seen to be spawned by degree *per se* in later Jacobean England. By spurning frankness of discussion, the ruler inevitably nurtures the conversational vices of sycophancy, bad faith, and information-getting, while preserving himself “like a foul black spider” (1.2.96) behind a web of equivocation. When the Duchess’s compares herself with this kind of figure – the “tyrant” who “doubles with his words / And fearfully equivocates” (1.2.353-54) – she surely references Jonson’s *Sejanus* with its infinitely devious Tiberius. If so she would also point to the Tacitean history play *per se*, a pessimistic species of historical drama that was gaining ascendancy over other kinds of history play in the Jacobean England.<sup>6</sup> For Webster it must have seemed as if the only way out the totalitarian nightmare conjured by Tacitus and his imitators on the Jacobean stage, was for an autocracy to willingly expel its “flattering sycophants” and “infamous persons” (1.1.8-9) and install a council of old-fashioned protestant honesty, as he felt the French court to have done in 1617. The contrast between the two types of court is driven home by Webster’s use of the “spring” metaphor. The French court is “a common fountain” dispensing either “silver drops in general” (1.1.12), whereas the Cardinal’s face is “a spring” for “the engendering of toads” (1.2.75-76). In a variation of this motif, Ferdinand and his brother, “are like plum trees that grow / crooked over standing pools: they are rich and o’erladen with fruit, but none but

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<sup>6</sup> “After the accession of James I in 1603, Tacitus became the most fashionable of the Roman historians and the principal source of English plays on Roman history” (Chernaik, p.17). Chernaik sees this as having been very much at the expense of Livy and his narrative of Republican virtue (p.18). He also notes that “to some extent, Tacitus was seen as a guide to survival in dark times” (p.18), and cites Peter Burke’s finding that “no fewer than 87 commentaries on Tacitus...were published in the seventeenth century” (p.17). Armitage, et al, also suggest that, from the 1590s, “English political life was increasingly marked by a growing pessimism and anxiety in political reflection”, whereby “Tacitus and Seneca, were increasingly used to challenge the moral authority of Cicero and Aristotle” (p.10). See also, J.H.M. Salmon.

crows, pies and caterpillars feed on them” (1.1.49-52) – the fountain image here being substituted by that of a stagnant pond.

To return to our question: does her deviousness mean that the opposition between the Duchess and her brothers has collapsed? Does it concede that “frailty thy name is woman” after all? Possibly, but not straightforwardly. What is suggested however is that – much as in the world of the Tacitean history play – “the path of simple virtue” is no longer viable. The Duchess’s project obliges her to live by the equivocal language into which she has lapsed and by which she is surrounded. Driven into further deceit, she excuses it as “*magnanima mensonga*”, but the sordid reality is that:

The great are like the base; nay, they are the same  
When they seek shameful ways to avoid shame. (2.3.51-52)

In this the Duchess proves no match for Bosola, who easily outwits her: ostensibly criticizing her for favouring “men’s pedigrees than virtues” (3.2.263), and then showering her with mock praise for having set up an imaginary academy of merit. Webster drives home the crookedness to which the Duchess has succumbed by ironic echoes of the earlier imagery of virtuous conversation:

For know, an honest statesman to a prince  
Is like a cedar planted by a spring:  
The spring bathes the tree’s root; the grateful tree  
Rewards it with his shadow. You have not done so. (3.2.265-67)

The “spring” image of exemplary political conversation is now just another trap. When Bosola praises Antonio’s conversation for its silent integrity another mocking image is heard:

His breast was filled with all perfection,  
And yet it seemed a private whispering room,  
It made so little noise of’t. (3.2.258-60)

While the primary sense is that Antonio's conversation is as saintly as that of the Duchess (or Sidney's Parthenia, Webster's source), the expression "whispering room" echoes Ferdinand's earlier thought that "a visor and a masque are whispering rooms / That were ne'er built for goodness" (1.2.249-50). The suggestion is that Antonio's modesty is itself a visor for mischief. Again, the Duchess's request to Bosola to, "lead me by the hand" (3.2.316), is echoes her request to Antonio, "I would have you lead your Fortune by the hand" (1.2.401).<sup>7</sup>

The full extent of the Duchess's lapse from the exemplary conversation with which she began is powerfully signalled in the moment of her discovery by Ferdinand. His own viciousness notwithstanding, Ferdinand is able to craft his intervention as a moment of rich poetic justice. First, the "whispering room" image is picked up by the closet in which Ferdinand surprises his sister. Next the "virtue" language in terms of which the Duchess and Antonio have been celebrated is echoed in a complex borrowing from *The Arcadia* that adds up to an indictment:

Virtue, where art thou hid? What hideous thing  
Is it that doth eclipse thee?....  
Or is it true thou art but a bare name,  
And no essential thing? (3.2.71-74)

The passage closely echoes one in which Gynecia, mother of Philoclea, the princess beloved by Pyrocles, discovers her inability to control her own passion for Pyrocles.<sup>8</sup> The thought is that virtue is eclipsed by sin to the point where the very possibility of its existence is questioned. The theology is clearly reformed: Calvin held that virtue was a mere epiphenomenon or illusion of fallen human nature whose primary reality is sin.<sup>9</sup> Ferdinand implies that he has heard the doctrine already but not quite credited it up to this point ("is it true...?") There is a homology between Gynecia and the

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<sup>7</sup> Another echo is Bosola's ironic praise of the Duchess raising "the neglected poets of your time...by that curious engine, your white hand" (3.2.294-96). The motif culminates in the stage direction, "gives her a dead man's hand" (4.1.44).

<sup>8</sup> "O virtue, where dost thou hide thyself? What hideous thing is this which doth eclipse thee? Or is it true that thou wert never but a vain name and no essential thing, which hast thus left thy professed servant when she had most need of thy lovely presence?" (*Arcadia*, 2.1.214).

<sup>9</sup> ref. Calvin...[cf. my Hamlet piece for SQ]

Duchess: both are married to elderly princes while young. Where the Duchess's first husband is dead, Gynecia's is still alive, however they both face the dilemma of being denied sexual fulfillment while still relatively young, and both rebel. The name "Gynecia" is virtual code for female frailty. Ferdinand's Jeremiad continues:

Oh, most imperfect light of human reason,  
That makest so unhappy to foresee  
What we can least prevent! Pursue thy wishes  
And glory in them. There's in shame no comfort,  
But to be past all bounds and sense of shame. (3.2.76-80)

The first three lines track with Sidney ("O imperfect proportion of human reason which can too much foresee and too little prevent", *Arcadia*, p.214); suggesting that the Duchess's reliance on human or secular reason has been misplaced. The last two lines also echo Sidney: "In shame there is no comfort but to be beyond all bounds of shame" (*Arcadia*, p.214).

Ferdinand's echo of this thought dictates the first phase of his revenge. Because the Duchess is now beyond the bounds of shame Ferdinand will allow her to continue her clandestine joys, but he refuses to see or converse with her again or know the identity of her husband-lover. The shame is theirs specifically. The erstwhile closet or "whispering room" is to become, "such a room...as our anchorites / To holier use inhabit" (3.2.101-2). Antonio is not to see the sun until dead, he is to be shut out from human conversation:

Let dogs and monkeys  
Only converse with him; and such dumb things  
To whom nature denies use, to sound his name...  
If thou do love him, cut out thine own tongue  
Lest it bewray him. (3.2.104-8)

The Duchess is to be terrified from conversation except in the residual sense of dumb lust (engaging in "conversation" with the opposite sex could carry the sense of engaging in sex, as in "Hastings conversation with Shaw's wife" (3.5.30) in

Shakespeare's *Richard III*). Ferdinand's strategy is now to isolate his sister from the properly human world and drive her mad. The focus on shame seems attuned specifically to the transgression of degree. Aside from the "hideous" apparition that has eclipsed virtue – presumably the sight of the Duchess herself as a personification of sin – Ferdinand is obsessed with shame rather than sin or guilt. The Duchess is so distracted that she falls in with this line of thinking: "My reputation / Is safe" (3.2.117-18), she tries to assure Ferdinand. The deeper questions of whether the Duchess has been guilty of a sin, and whether her equivocations with Antonio are part of this, find no further resonance in the imagery of conversation and to this extent go unanswered.

In spite of Ferdinand's professed desire not to know the identity of his sister's lover/husband, her cohabitation is allowed to continue precisely in order to discover it. Once this is known, Ferdinand communicates with his sister mainly in the form of dumb shows and masques, spectacular displays which – like the masques of Ariel in *The Tempest* – refuse conversation and seek to overwhelm their target audience with madness.

Once again, the question of whether the Duchess is indeed guilty of sin goes unanswered. As too does the question of what exactly her sin consists in: the transgression of degree, the entrapment of Antonio, the cultivation of deception. To my mind it is here that the play reflects the moral pessimism of the Tacitean history play and the Jacobean revenge play alike. Questions of virtue ethics – almost exclusively the Elizabethan preoccupation of the *Arcadia* – are swallowed up in the wholesale evil of the state. In the world of the Tacitean history play, one can die with virtue but not live by virtue (not at least in the sense of an active exercise of virtue). The signature of virtue thus becomes suicide. In the Jacobean revenge play, the question of man's or woman's guilt before man in such a world becomes irrelevant for a different reason: namely the victim's abdication of the right to judge by choosing to revenge (a damnable sin). The only question remaining in the revenge play is that of one's guilt before God, effectively the primal guilt of which man is always guilty in the sight of God. In the words of Paul Ricoeur: "Guilt designates the subjective moment in fault as sin is its ontological moment. Sin designates the real situation of man before God" (p.101).

It is this, ironically, that Bosola is able to clarify for the Duchess. The last and most surprising conversation that we are concerned with is that between these two antithetical figures in the scenes leading up to the Duchess's death. Roughly, what interests me about this sequence is how the Duchess regains her integrity of speech, both to man and to God, but not without the conscious aid of her murderer. Bosola's decision to "comfort" the Duchess is as unpredictable as "the irregular crab". From the moment that he is struck by the Duchess's constancy in adversity, ("a behavior so noble / as gives a majesty to adversity", 4.1.6-7), Bosola's agenda begins to diverge from his master's. Thus instead of trying to drive the Duchess to despair with the dead man's hand and the masque of madmen (in which he plays no part), Bosola approaches the murder via an elaborate ritual of penitence, a virtual *ars moriendi* – in which he plays successively, "a grave maker" and "the common bellman".<sup>10</sup> His plan is to bring the Duchess "by degrees to mortification" (4.2.170). While making no move to stop Bosola, Ferdinand is unimpressed: "Thy pity is nothing of kin to thee" (4.1.134). What is particularly interesting to me about this move on Bosola's part is its unmotivated, tangential and crab-like quality. Ferdinand is right. Pity should be the last thing we should expect of a thorough-going villain. Yet Bosola falls into and then confirms himself in pity and admiration for no other reason than the emotional response that his conversation with the Duchess so unpredictably inspires. We might characterize this conversation as supererogatory in the sense that it has nothing to do with Bosola's actual function and in virtue of his sheer curiosity about the Duchess's mental state.

It is difficult to construe the dialogue between Bosola and the Duchess over this sequence (roughly from 3.5 to 4.2). Cross-currents are at work. On the one hand the Duchess is contemptuous of Bosola's hypocrisy, his Christian mealy-mouthedness. On the other, she does eventually respond to the ritual of *ars moriendi* that he confects for her and makes a good Christian end.

It is possible to read the Duchess as already inclined to penitence independently of Bosola's attempts at Christian "comfort". She has already acknowledged the "heavy

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<sup>10</sup> See, Bettie Anne Doeblér, "Continuity in the Art of Dying: *The Duchess of Malfi*", in Bloom, ed., *op.cit.*, 65-74.

hand” of “Heaven” (3.5.76) when taking leave of Antonio and her children. She expects to be reunited “in the eternal church” (3.5.69), which is to say the congregation or conversation of heaven. She appropriates Ferdinand’s “anchorite” image when finding Antonio’s kiss colder, “Than that I have seen an holy anchorite / Give to a dead man’s skull” (3.5.86-87).

But Bosola’s role as comfort-bringer is not redundant. An important strand of the Duchess’s response to her ordeal is stoic. Her wish to join Antonio in “the eternal church” is possibly suicidal. The phrase is borrowed from Sidney’s Erona, a queen in the *Arcadia* who seeing no way to marry the man she loves vows to kill herself, “as well by poison as knife, to send her soul, at least, to be married in the eternal church with him” (p.302). Erona resembles the Duchess again in that the object of her love, Antiphilus, is far inferior to her in rank: “so mean as that he was but the son of her nurse”(p.302).

The Duchess’s initial response then is arguably despair. Part of this response is the all-too-human hatred, and indiscriminate cursing. The first is what she feels for Bosola’s “counterfeit face” (3.5.116). Cursing is a more general urge, one of the effects Wither attribute to the winged tongue. When asked by Bosola whether her children can “prattle” (3.5.111), she answers that “since they were born accursed, / Curses shall be their first language” (3.5.113-14). She “could curse the stars” (4.1.93) and curse, “the world / To its first chaos” (4.1.96-97). She counts “this world a tedious theatre” (4.1.81), and when Bosola offers to “be of comfort” and “save your life” (4.1.83), she has, “not leisure to tend so small a business” (4.1.84). If this is *contemptu mundi*, it is the pagan variety:

Portia, I’ll new kindle thy coals again  
And revive the rare and almost dead example  
Of a loving wife. (4.1.70-73)

To Bosola however, this is despair, exactly the response sought by Ferdinand in the display of, “the artificial figures of / Antonio and his Children, appearing as if they were dead” (4.1.53-54). Mortification is the opposite of despair because it prepares not just for death but salvation. In finally choosing mortification over despair and

suicide, the Duchess is finally able to distinguish Bosola the murderer from Bosola the voice of mortification. That she recognizes Bosola beneath his disguises as “tomb-maker” and “common bellman” seems clear by her response to his claim to be “the common bellman” (4.2.166): “Even now thou saidst / Thou wast a tomb-maker” (169-70). The Duchess is simultaneously able to reject Bosola the intriguer (“So I were out of your whispering”, 4.2.215), and answer the test that Bosola the tomb-maker puts to her: in what style should he build her tomb? Should it be in the modish Jacobean style, with a gorgeously dressed figurine reclining head-in-hand, “as / Their minds were wholly bent on the world - / The selfsame way they turn their faces” (4.2.153-55)? The Duchess is unmoved by fantasies of luxury in death (“smothered / With cassia”, 4.2.209-10), and – undismayed by the stranglers’ cord – sees it as a way to “pull down heaven upon me” (4.2.223). She dies in humility before God and defiance before her murderer (“I am Duchess of Malfi still”, 4.2.137). But she would not, I believe, have found her way to such an impressive ending without Bosola’s unpredictable and entirely superegregatory offer of “comfort”.

For all his democratic attitude towards speech, there is in Guazzo a strong respect for decorum and moderation. There is also an underlying presumption towards self-possession. One should not let oneself be carried away by flighty speech nor should one allow oneself to scuttle aimlessly this way and that. In particular one should be wary of allowing one’s own speech to be captured or tainted by others. What is interesting to me about the final conversations of Bosola and the Duchess however is that in spite of themselves each is overawed by the other and each is deflected from their consciously held ideas of themselves by the other. The Duchess’s constancy reminds Bosola of his own inconstancy in having wickedly abandoned his own goodness (earlier remarked by Antonio: “This foul melancholy / Will poison all his goodness”, 1.1.76-77). For her part, the Duchess is enabled by Bosola to reject two disastrous ways of meeting her end – cursing her stars and stoic suicide – for the path he offers her: the *ars moriendi*. By the strange alchemy of conversation – at its least guarded and most indiscreet – each figure brings the other a redemption that they couldn’t have found by their own unaided means.

ie. Tacitean History Play  
parallel

NB: In death the Duchess manages to “judge” her persecutor (Ferdinand) in the way that in “The Roman Actor”, the execution of the two stoic senators “judges” the tyrant Domitian who has procured their deaths. Can quote to illustrate.  
NNB: the emblem of the spider and the fly cf. Ferdinand as spider....

NNNB: Where the Duchess dies in “constancy”, Antonio dies seeking to persuade the cardinal to leniency by visiting him in his closet. This is a middle class and conversational gambit.



NB: Bosola as "spider" in *Wither* emblem of spider & fly: for predatory reasons, also for sheer curiosity in a vain pursuit. Does this link up with "buzola"? Is there some mania for perfectionism in him whereby his outraged sense of justice is piqued by the duchess? or whereby his long drowned sense of decency is brought to the surface?

17

## Endnotes / Bibliography

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